STATES OF MIND

THE DEVIL PROBLEM

Elaine Pagels won popular and scholarly acclaim for her revolutionary interpretation of the early Christian Church in "The Gnostic Gospels." Then unthinkable personal tragedy led her to the subject of a new book: What is Satan?

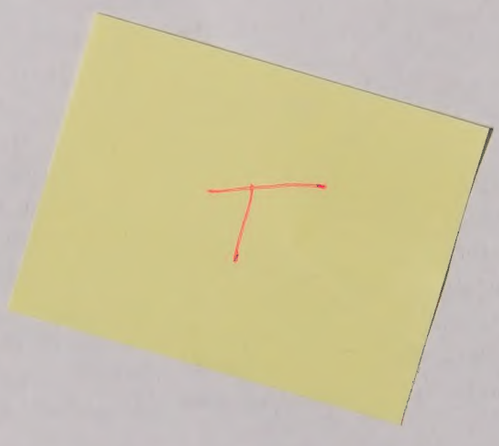
BY DAVID REMNICK

SIXTEEN years ago, Elaine Pagels, who was then a professor in her mid-thirties at Barnard College, shattered the myth that early Christianity was a unified movement and faith. It is a rarity for a scholar so young to alter even slightly the historical view of something as vast and essential as the Western world's dominant religion. Ordinarily, only the physicist or the mathematician can hope to enter early middle age having made a scholarly mark; indeed, for such a scientist a glide into the thirties without distinction can be cause for despair—or a job in university administration. The historian, by contrast, cannot rely on intuition or mental speed. History is an art not only of imagination but also of accumulation—of languages, reading, travel, perspective. Pagels, who is now the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton, had accumulated thousands of hours in the library, the classroom, and the archives, and a working command of Greek, Latin, German, Hebrew, French, Italian, and Coptic as well—an appropriately full quiver for a specialist in early Christianity. She had also, at this preposterously early point in her career, hit the academic bull's-eye. In 1979, Pagels published "The Gnostic Gospels," a brief and elegant analysis of a series of ancient documents known collectively as the Nag Hammadi Library. Just as Edmund Wilson illuminated for a wide audience the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Pagels explained the value and meaning of a trove of manuscripts unearthed in 1945 in the upper-Egyptian desert by a peasant named Muhammad Ali al-Samman. While digging near the village of Nag Hammadi for *sabakh*, a soft soil used as fertilizer, Muhammad Ali found a red earthenware jar. Thinking there might be gold inside, he smashed the jar with his mattock, and found instead thirteen papyrus books bound in leather. That night, his mother burned much of the find in the oven as kindling. What she did not burn ended up in the hands of black marketeers, antiquities dealers, and, eventually, scholars of first- and second-century Christianity.

Through a careful reading of the fifty-two sacred texts that survived—they are Coptic translations of Greek originals, some as old as the four Gospels—Pagels made it clear that early Christianity was far more complicated than anyone had ever imagined. A wildly diverse compendium of poems, chants, myths, gospels, pagan documents, and spiritual instructions, the texts are distinct evidence of fierce theological debate and of an alternative tradition within early Christianity—a kind of mystical variant, much like the Zen tradition in Buddhism, Kabbalah in Judaism, Sufism in Islam. What was more, Pagels argued, the early Church Fathers, in their attempt to eliminate this more experiential Christianity in favor of building an orthodox institution—a universal, or catholic, church—declared the texts to be heretical. The Gnostics may well have buried the texts to avoid brutal purges being led by the notorious Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, in the year 367. Although many of the stories in what became the New Testament—the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection of Christ—are at least as strange as anything in the Gnostic texts, the Church leaders canonized the Gospels attributed to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John as a reliable basis for a social organization with mass appeal. Gnosticism, with its emphasis on individual divinity and unmediated personal communion, was a threat to the authority of bishops and priests. Its suggestion, for instance, that the Resurrection of Jesus was a mythological vision, rather than, as the Synoptic Gospels assert, a historical event, was intolerable, and so was the Gnostic notion that God was both father and mother of Jesus. Thus, in the second century an orthodoxy began to take shape—and, with it, a temperament. Irenaeus, the orthodox Bishop of Lyons and one of the leading crusaders against the Gnostics, declared that, while certain heretics "boast that they possess more gospels than there really are," no Church leader may, "however highly gifted he may be in matters of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these."

"The Gnostic Gospels" won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the praise of Pagels' professional colleagues. Harold Bloom, a literary critic with a minor in Gnosticism, credited Pagels (in the Washington *Post*) with "devoted and sound scholarship"; reviewers remarked on her skills as an artful, concise explainer. She had, remarkably, delivered a complicated argument to a popular audience without cheating the demands of scholarship.

In the years that followed the success of "The Gnostic Gospels," Elaine Pagels seemed to lead a life of invariable good fortune. Her professional future was limitless, her personal life a source of pleasure and vitality. Her marriage, to the physicist Heinz Pagels, was a match of intellect and spirit. Heinz Pagels was a research scientist, a writer, the executive director of the New York Academy of Sciences, a human-rights activist, and a famously charming raconteur. "In a way, they were a perfect couple," Elizabeth Diggs, a playwright and one of Elaine's closest friends, recalls. "Heinz was tall, blond, fabulously good-looking. He was brilliant, and he was good. He had flaws—he could be a name-dropper—but he was a good, deeply moral man. Heinz had more passion and love of the



world than almost anyone else I've ever known. He was a perfect foil to Elaine. He adored Elaine and completely supported her. He more than supported her—he championed her."

In 1980, Elaine gave birth to a son, Mark. When Mark was two, he was diagnosed with a respiratory ailment that would inevitably shorten his life; this knowledge haunted the family, yet they lived a nearly ideal existence. Elaine began work on a study of the Adam-and-Eve story and the way Augustine of Hippo had reinterpreted it in the fourth century as a parable of inherent sinfulness rather than of human freedom. Heinz became increasingly involved in writing popular books about physics and in studying the emerging field of complexity theory. Mark grew up a radiant and preternaturally intelligent little boy, who went everywhere in New York with his parents (often on Heinz's shoulders): to the Hayden Planetarium and the Museum of Natural History, to the ships docked along the Hudson, to the galleries in the East Village. In 1986, Elaine and Heinz adopted a second child, a girl named Sarah.

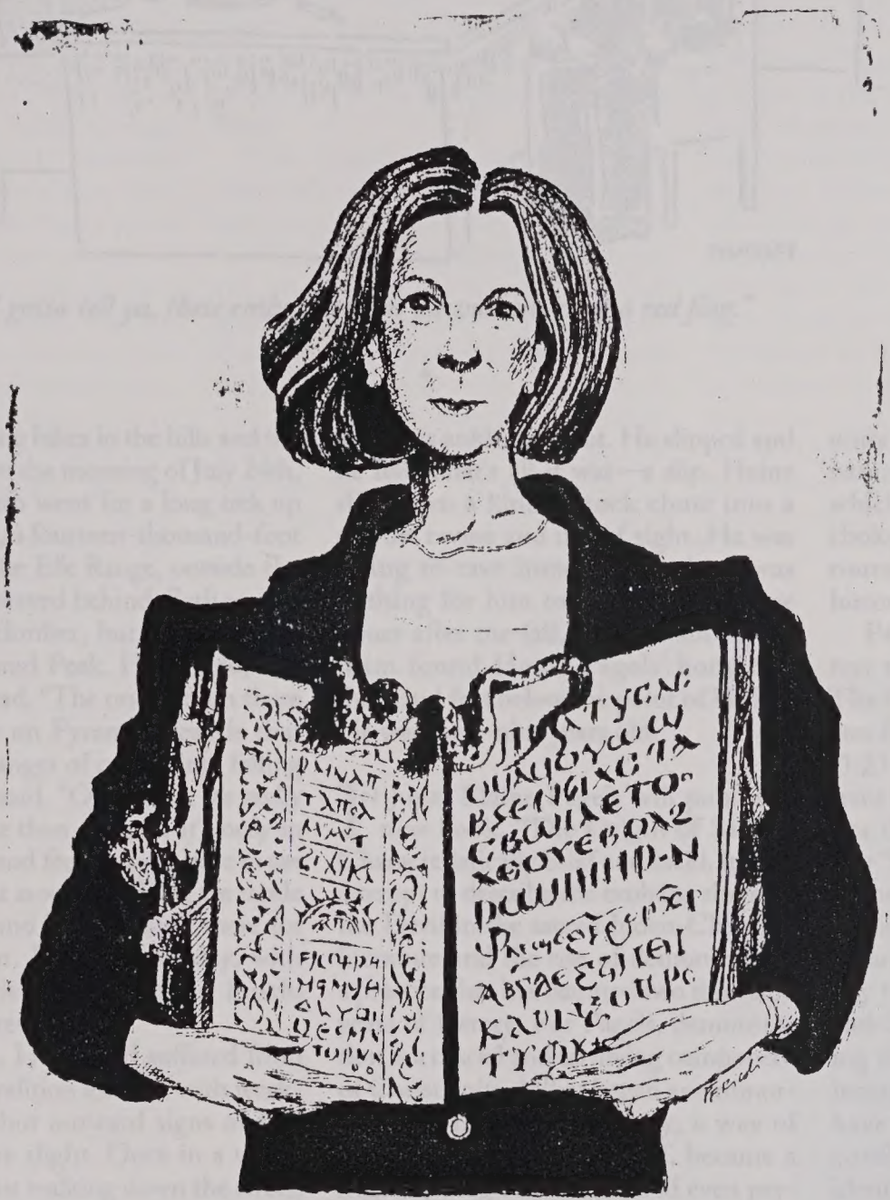
On April 10, 1987, Mark Pagels died, at the age of six and a half. As he got older, his lungs had failed to grow properly and had lost their elasticity. By the time Elaine finished the manuscript of "Adam, Eve, and the Serpent" and Heinz finished his study of complexity theory, "The Dreams of Reason," they found themselves dedicating their books to the memory of their son. Friends remember coming out of the funeral service, at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, on Fifth Avenue, and seeing men and women weeping openly as they went down the steps. "I've been to God knows how many funerals and yet this one seemed to break everyone's heart," one friend said.

For the next year, Elaine and Heinz plunged into an unthinkable grief, an ache worthy of Job. "Raw absence, sadness, dumb grief," Elaine called it later. But they refused to succumb to despair. They still had their daughter, Sarah, and after about a year had passed they adopted a son—David. Heinz, especially, provided a spirit and a perspective that helped move the family forward. In "The Cosmic Code," a study of modern physics, published in 1982, he concluded with a joyful meditation on the pleasure of understanding, even in the face of death, some of the structures and the logic of the universe:

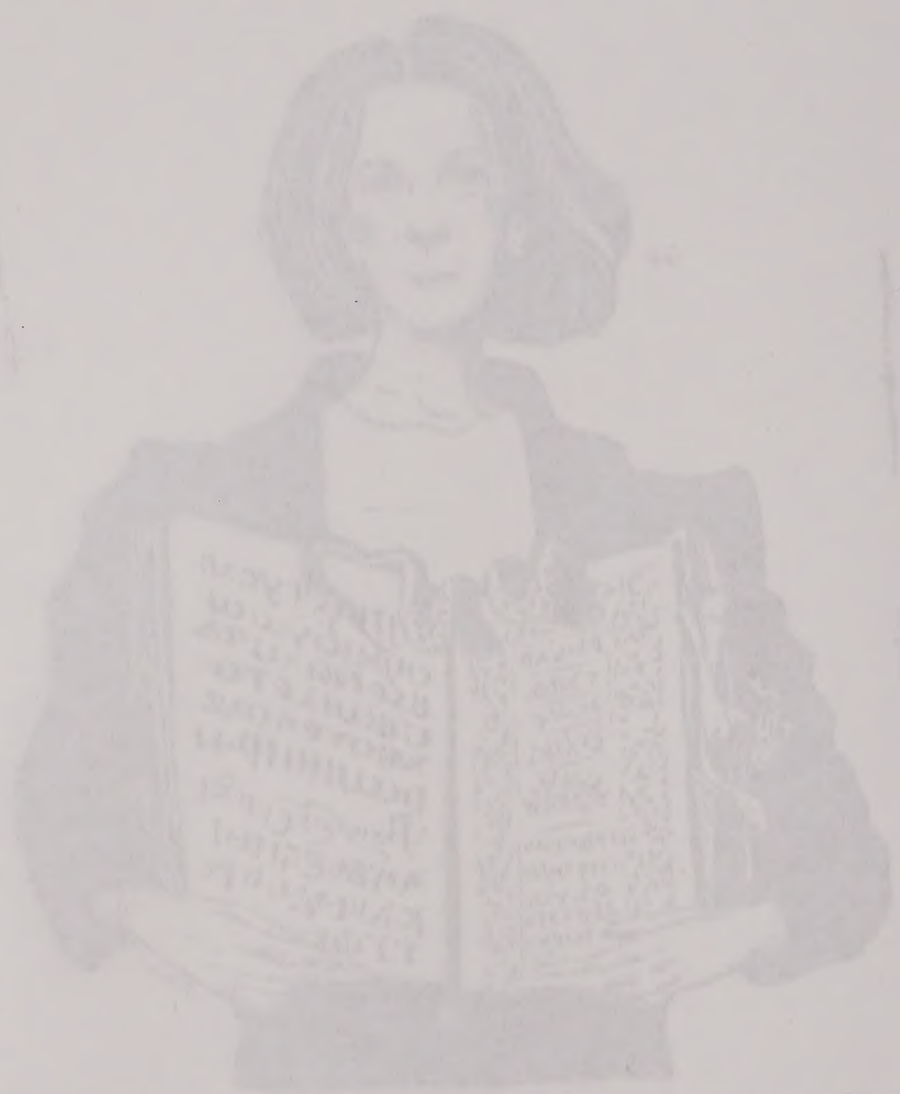
> I used to climb mountains in snow and ice, hanging onto the sides of great rocks. I was describing one of my adventures to an older friend once, and when I had finished he asked me, "Why do you want to kill yourself?" I protested. I told him that the rewards I wanted were of sight, of pleasure, of the thrill of pitting my body and my skills against nature. My friend replied, "When you are as old as I am you will see that you are trying to kill yourself."
>
> I often dream about falling. Such dreams are commonplace to the ambitious or those who climb mountains. Lately I dreamed I was clutching at the face of a rock but it would not hold. Gravel gave way. I grasped for a shrub, but it pulled loose, and in cold terror I fell into the abyss. Suddenly I realized that my fall was relative; there was no bottom and no end. A feeling of pleasure overcame me. I realized that what I embody, the principle of life, cannot be destroyed. It is written into the cosmic code, the order of the universe. As I continued to fall in the dark void, embraced by the vault of the heavens, I sang to the beauty of the stars and made my peace with the darkness.

By the beginning of the summer of 1988, friends began to think that Heinz and Elaine were starting to emerge from the shock of their first child's death. That June, the family went to Aspen, where Heinz could work at the Center for Physics, Elaine could read, and they and the children could relax together. Seth Lloyd, a young physicist who was working with Heinz on complexity theory, recalled that the summer started out with an aura of promise. "Elaine and Heinz were really looking happy," he said. "It seemed as if they'd finally made it to the other side."

In Aspen, Heinz and, sometimes,



According to Pagels, the Gospel writers' creation of Satan gave rise to the moral history of the West. "This material is painful," she says.



"I gotta tell ya, these embezzlement convictions raise a red flag."

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Elaine took long hikes in the hills and the mountains. On the morning of July 24th, Heinz and Seth went for a long trek up Pyramid Peak, a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain in the Elk Range, outside the town. Elaine stayed behind. Seth was an experienced climber, but he had never been up Pyramid Peak. Heinz had, and he took the lead. "The only reason there is any danger on Pyramid Peak is that there is the danger of crumbling, falling rock," Lloyd said. "Otherwise, it's really more of a hike than a climb. It's only in the last thousand feet that you have to use your hands. At around midday, we made it to the top and hung around there for about an hour. It was a nice day, with long, clear views. We ate our lunch. Then we started down."

As a child, Heinz had suffered from polio. The condition left him with weakened ankles, but outward signs of that weakness were slight. Once in a while, climbing or just walking down the street, he would stumble, but not very often. He wore ordinary hiking boots on the climb up Pyramid Peak. "We'd come down a half mile, maybe four hundred vertical feet from the top, and then we came to a tricky bit on a ledge with a deep drop below," Lloyd went on. "Heinz was in front. At the end of the ledge, there's a spot where you have to hop onto a saddle, a little ridge. It's a hop of a couple of feet—nothing that a kid couldn't do, really—but Heinz had those weak ankles, and as he landed on the ledge his ankle gave out. He slipped and he fell. That's all it was—a slip. Heinz slid down a kind of rock chute into a narrow ravine and out of sight. He was trying to save himself, but there was nothing for him to grab onto." Three hours after the fall, a mountain-rescue team found Heinz Pagels' body two thousand feet below the point of his fall. He was forty-nine years old.

In June, Elaine Pagels will publish a new book, "The Origin of Satan." Characteristically brief and lucid, it is an attempt to describe the evolving shape of the Devil in the sacred Judeo-Christian literature and the rise of demonization, a practice that has haunted two thousand years of history. For Pagels, demonization is a crucial and terrifying component of Christianity. What began as a minority sect's rhetorical strategy, a way of defining and asserting itself, became a majority religion's moral, and even psychological, justification for persecution: first of Jews, then of Romans and of heretics—of all opponents, real or imagined.

Pagels, like many other scholars, begins with the observation that, although all kinds of angels frequent the Hebrew Bible, demonic beings are nearly absent; there are agents of obstruction in the Book of Job and in Numbers, for example, but they are still members of the heavenly court. This changes with the rise of sectarianism. To two first-century Jewish sects—the Essenes (who died out and became a historical curiosity) and the followers of Jesus (who flourished)—figures called, variously, Satan or Belial or Beelzebub, who would shatter the unity of the heavenly court, appear as the great Other in a cosmic war. Pagels outlines the way the four Gospel writers, who probably wrote between the years 60 and 70, just after the Roman destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish people, shaped their stories and imagery to unify the Jewish followers of Jesus. The typology of God and Satan, Us and Them, appears. Although the Gospels tell a story of the moral genius of Jesus—his lessons of charity, redemption, and love—they also tell a parallel story in which the enemies of Jesus threaten tribal unity on earth and are, moreover, incarnations of Satan. This second story, in which the Gospel writers create a psychology of cosmic war, has influenced the course—the tragic course—of Western history.

Pagels begins with the details of the text to chart the appearance of Satan. The Gospel of Mark, for example, deviates from Jewish tradition and describes (3:23-27) the ministry of Jesus in constant battle with the "kingdom" of Satan. For the Gospel writers, the first enemy was "the intimate enemy"—the majority of their fellow-Jews, who did not follow Christ. The creation of such a powerful Satan in the orthodox Christian cosmology becomes not only a foundation for anti-Semitism but also a pattern of viewing the world. "Such visions have been incorporated into Christian tradition and have served, among other things, to confirm for Christians their own identification with God and to demonize their opponents—first other Jews, then pagans, and later dissident Christians called heretics," Pagels writes. This apocalyptic vision, in which victory is assured to those who stand on the side of Christ, "has taught even secular-minded people to interpret the history of Western culture as a moral history in which the forces of good contend against the forces of evil in the world." Demonization is crucial to the language and thinking of fundamentalists, from Pat Robertson to the ayatollahs; during the Gulf

War, it was present in the rhetoric of both Saddam Hussein and George Bush. Demonization is also present even in secular fundamentalisms: Lenin's rhetoric, his prediction of a global victory over the capitalist infidels, borrows from the religious tradition he promised to bury.

Curiously, "The Origin of Satan" begins with a nakedly personal moment, a hint of the way Pagels transformed pain into scholarship: "In 1988, when my husband of twenty years died in a hiking accident, I became aware that, like many people who grieve, I was living in the presence of an invisible being—living, that is, with a vivid sense of someone who had died." It is a tantalizing moment, but, just as quickly as Pagels opens the curtain on her creative process in "The Origin of Satan," she rings it shut.

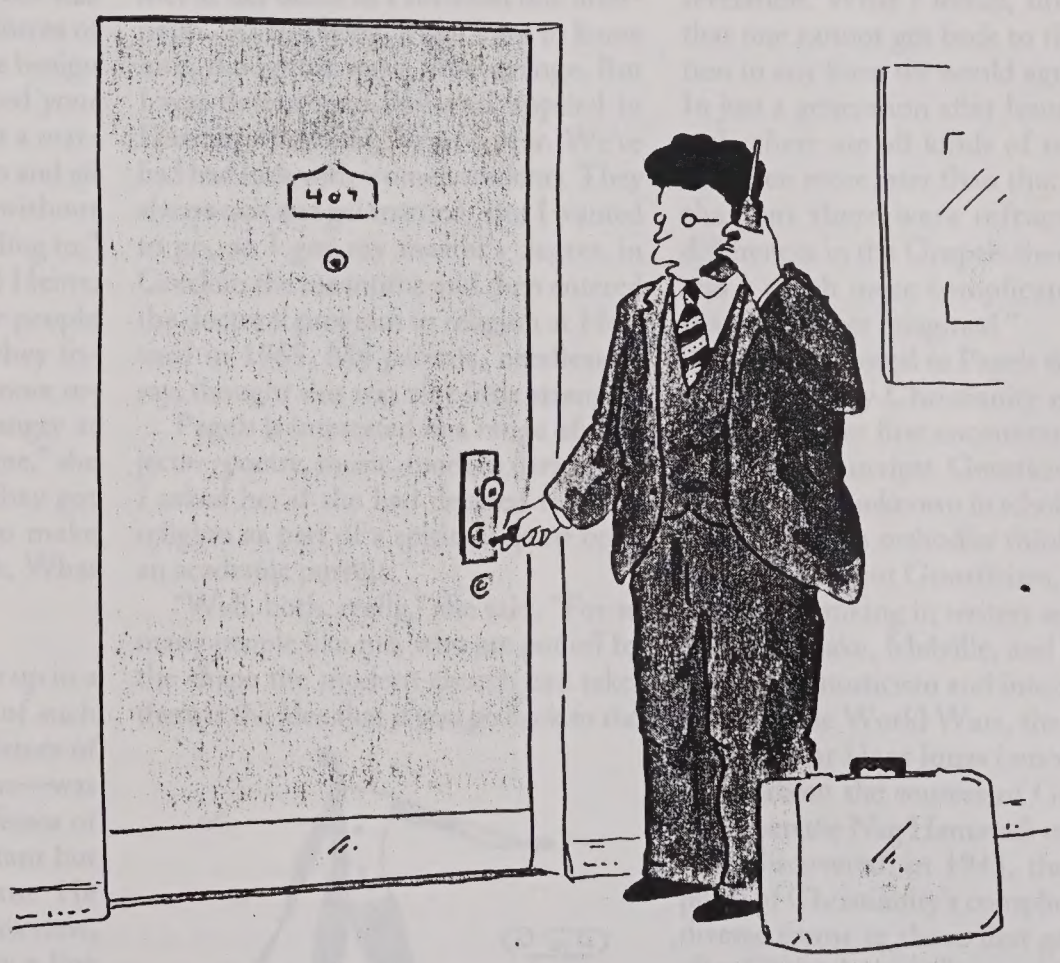
When I first met Pagels, she reminded me of a caricature Einstein—the dreamy academic heading down Nassau Street, his keys falling out of one pocket, a pen leaking in the other. Pagels, too, presents a deceptively absent-minded face to the world. Because she is forever rushing from one commitment to another, she is often late, forgetting things, dropping things, a little helpless. Her acquaintance with the world of the ordinary seems, at times, unsure. When we travelled together from Princeton to Harvard, train schedules and airport gates seemed to baffle her. In a retro sort of way, she invites help. You can't resist carrying her bag, or checking her forehead to see if she has a fever. And yet she is enormously strong. Pagels not only survived two tragedies in the space of fifteen months but since then has written another book, reared her children, taught her many students. She is, by all reports, a good colleague, a devoted friend. Her mind is quick and generous. At fifty-two, she has a mild, earnest appearance (a rounded, friendly face, windblown blond hair), and yet in conversation she is absolutely fierce, focussed, picking apart the careless question, delighted by the unexpected one. When she delivers her lectures for an undergraduate course on the New Testament—Monday and Wednesday mornings at ten—she does not so much pace the room as prowl it. Pagels radiates so much intensity that you somehow imagine a fast-burning cigarette in her hand. There is none. She does not smoke. She smolders.

"At one point in my life, I had to make a decision," Pagels told me one day as I raced after her, past a "Don't Walk" sign and into the street. (We narrowly missed being hit by a maroon minivan doing about thirty miles an hour.) "I had to decide whether to have too little or too much in my life," she went on. "Study, children, friends, travel—all of it. That was an easy one. I chose too much."

After reading the manuscript of "The Origin of Satan," I asked her how the death of her husband and her child could possibly have led her to a study of the Devil.

"The tragedy—the *tragedies*—were absolutely devastating, unimaginable," she began. Her voice was even, deliberate. "You're just beginning to think you can get through one tragedy and start again and then this hits—Heinz's death. David was three months old and Sarah was two and a half when Heinz died. The thought of raising these children without him was inconceivable. But the question was: Can you get through? I found that in times of grief the church has little to say. It's just too remote. The meditation techniques I'd learned from Trappist monks in Colorado were more useful. But just to imagine doing anything was so hard. I withdrew from teaching and went for a year to the Institute for Advanced Study. Mostly, I spent time with my children and my friends, reading, listening to music."

After a brief pause, she went on, "When two things like that happen, you wonder, How can I cope? You wonder, What ever happened to a sense of proportion in the universe? But the universe, of course, is not about that. Heinz had a sense of all this. His work was all about chaos—chaos theory. But in me—even in me, who was raised by a nonbeliever—there was a subliminal perception of a morally ordered universe. Look at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Hebrew Bible. It is a story about how a feature of the natural universe, a volcano, destroyed two towns. The writer tries to describe how every one of the men in these towns was evil and therefore they were all destroyed



"Hi, honey—I'm home."

by this volcano. But in fact erupting is simply what volcanoes do. They erupt, regardless of whether anyone in their path is good or evil. So I began to think about these stories and these questions, and move myself out of a position of subliminally accepting a position in which a moral order is so present. I began to see and become aware of the extent to which I perceive things through this idea of a universe of good and evil. It didn't matter that I was not a believer in the traditional sense. These stories, whether you believe them literally or not, are shadow images, the mental architecture we live in, and they are pervasive.

"The kind of response that most of us would have to such an event would be as though the event itself were part of a morally ordered universe, as if God had planned it to punish someone. This to me seemed impossible and strange. Nevertheless, it is a pattern that works on you psychologically. The impulse is to ask, Why me? It just couldn't be meaningless, any more than the birth of a wonderful child could be meaningless. I began thinking of how the Greeks and the Romans thought about the forces of nature as powerful forces that were benign or malevolent. They either graced your life or destroyed it, but it was not a matter of intention. Zeus and Apollo and all the rest affected your life, but without thinking about it, without intending to."

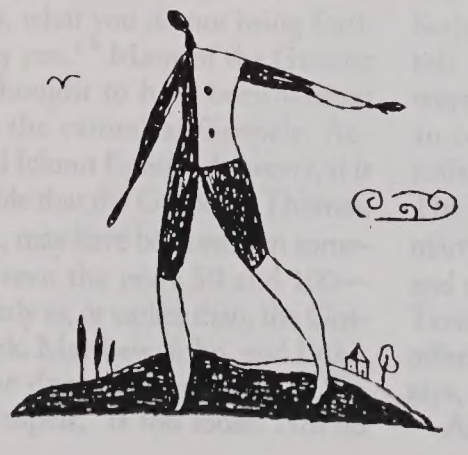
After the deaths of Mark and Heinz, Pagels said, she wondered how people dealt with catastrophe, where they focussed their anger. "For people more religious—well, some might get angry at God, but that made no sense to me," she said. "In the ancient Church, they got mad at Satan. That seemed to make more sense. And so I had to ask, What is Satan? What's the Devil?"

ELAINE HIESEY PAGELS grew up in a world in which the idea of such questions—or of studying the history of religion as an academic discipline—was faintly comic. Her father, a professor of biology at Stanford, was Protestant but almost aggressively nonobservant. He considered religion obsolete. In his view, there had been in human history a line of progress from magic to religion and on to science. Partly out of curiosity, partly out of a teen-ager's search for the precise way to drive her parents crazy, Elaine began going to a local evangelical church when she was thirteen. She succeeded in her rebellion, but stopped going to church a couple of years later, when she decided that the stories and the instructions of the Bible were being understood too literally. Her ambivalence, which persists, is the familiar modern one: a constant wavering between spiritual need or interest and the unwillingness to heed the orthodoxies of any church. Even now, when Pagels is asked whether she is a believer she will answer "Not exactly" or "Not in the sense that believers mean it," or something of the kind. She is deeply attracted to religious ritual: she has visited a Zen center in San Francisco, watched Hopi snake-dancing rituals in the Southwest. (Nowadays, she even goes regularly to an Episcopal church, "though at first it ran counter to my self-image.") After long thought, she decided, upon graduating from Stanford, to apply for graduate study in religion at Harvard.

"At that time, in the sixties, religion was not considered a fit subject for study by most of my peers," Pagels said when we met at her office in Princeton one afternoon. "Even Heinz, when I got to know him, thought it was a little strange. But I was determined. When I applied to Harvard, they said, 'Wait a year. We've had bad luck with women students. They always quit and get married.' But I wanted to go, so I got my master's degree in Greek in the meantime and then entered the doctoral program in religion at Harvard in 1965. My parents, needless to say, thought this was all a little strange."

Pagels is interested in a range of subjects—poetry, music, modern dance—so I asked her if she had decided to study religion as part of a spiritual quest or as an academic pursuit.

"Well, both, really," she said. "For so many people like me, who are put off by the shape the modern church can take, there is the idea that if you go back to the early Christian Church you'll find some pure golden age, some clear and much simpler version of what later became more complex and amplified. Christians look around the world today and they see Christian Scientists, Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptists, Methodists, right-wing Presbyterians, Pentecostalists—and they say that this is a tremendous cacophony of voices, an impossible situation. When I went to graduate school with that rather naïve idea, one of my teachers—Krister Stendahl, a former Lutheran bishop—asked me, 'Why have you come?' I said something about finding the essence of Christianity. And he looked at me in a very penetrating way and said, 'How do you know it has an essence?' Then I knew why I had come to graduate school—to be asked that kind of question. But I was looking for some phenomenon that would account for both my fascination with Christianity and my disaffection with its various institutional forms. I thought that it would be way back in the beginning, something pure in its divine revelation. What I found, first of all, is that one cannot get back to that revelation in any form we would agree is pure. In just a generation after Jesus of Nazareth, there are all kinds of refractions, and even more later than that. Not only that but there were refractions and differences in the Gospels themselves. It was a much more complicated picture than I had ever imagined."



Nothing proved to Pagels the complications of early Christianity more decisively than her first encounters with the Gnostic manuscripts. Gnosticism was not by any means unknown in scholarly circles: early Christian orthodox thinkers wrote extensively about Gnosticism, mostly by way of debunking it; writers as diverse as Gibbon, Blake, Melville, and Jung were aware of Gnosticism and interested in it; between the World Wars, the German-born scholar Hans Jonas (among others) wrote about the sources of Gnosticism. But when the Nag Hammadi manuscripts were discovered, in 1945, the concrete proof of Christianity's complications, its diverse forms in those first generations after Christ, became inarguable.

As had been the case with the Dead Sea Scrolls, study of the Nag Hammadi Library languished for years because of confusion, bureaucracy, and academic turf battles. For several years after Mu-

APRIL IN THE VILLAGE

It is so quiet in the afternoon;
you breathe or pause, and something
presses against your chest.

I read. On the bed
beside me two women
make love.

There are thin round
crates of lemons.
Past the window
a man is hauling
open boxes of lettuce and plums.

On the bed, someone cries
and is sucked out
of the breast.

A square of yard
is being swept.
The grasses begin to go out
around the lamppost.

—SAMN STOCKWELL

hammad Ali found the manuscripts, they were mainly in the hands of antiquities dealers, who tried to make their fortune from them. Some papers slowly became available to scholars, but mostly they remained scattered. In 1952, the Egyptian government declared the manuscripts national property, yet in that same year a dealer managed to sell an important codex to the Jung Institute, in Zurich. Eventually, this and the rest of the Nag Hammadi Library were returned to Cairo and put in the Coptic Museum. Throughout the fifties, some scholars were allowed to examine the papers, but there was still no formal system of access or publication. Finally, in 1961, the director-general of UNESCO called for the publication of the papers and proposed the establishment of an international scholarly panel to prepare an edition of photographs of them. The first volume of that edition appeared in 1972, and the series was completed in 1977. James Robinson, the director of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, who was a member of the UNESCO committee, played an especially heroic role, circulating copies of all the manuscripts privately, so that many scholars had access to the find well before official publication.

Pagels was one of the scholars who won access to the Gnostic samizdat. She was thrilled to be among the favored few. Twenty years after the find in upper Egypt, the texts were still a loosely held secret. The first she had heard about the Nag Hammadi find was when she began her graduate studies at Harvard. With the encouragement of her mentor at Harvard, Helmut Koester, she learned Coptic in order to study the manuscripts. In 1970, she completed her doctoral dissertation on the struggle between Gnostic and orthodox Christianity, and in 1975 she went to Cairo to study the documents at first hand. Her experience there was amazing. In the Coptic Museum, she worked at a table, hunched over papyri that seemed to her far more beautiful than any of the photographs she had seen circulating among scholars in the United States; children played nearby, and a cleaning woman mopped the floor as Pagels made her way through the Dialogue of the Savior, the Interpretation of Knowledge, the Gospel of Mary, and all the other strange texts of the Gnostics—myths, mystical instructions, creation epics, alternative gospels. Pagels joined an international team of a few dozen scholars which, under Robinson's direction, issued an English edition of the manuscripts—"The Nag Hammadi Library"—in 1977.

"It's funny," she said. "I remember reading that novel by Irving Wallace, 'The Word.' It's about someone finding a secret gospel. At the end, it turns out to be something trivial—some sort of Protestant truism, totally boring and disappointing. But when you open the Gospel of Thomas, which was hidden for so many centuries, it's not trivial at all. You find Jesus speaking cryptically, as in a Zen koan. In the Gospel of Thomas—this is one of my favorite passages—Jesus says, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.' " Many of the Gnostic texts are thought to have been written later than the canonical Gospels. According to Helmut Koester, however, it is quite possible that the Gospel of Thomas, or part of it, may have been written somewhere between the years 50 and 100—that is, as early as, or earlier than, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, John, and Luke.

To some degree, Pagels' title, "The Gnostic Gospels," is too loose. Not all the Nag Hammadi papers are Gnostic in origin, and not all are, strictly speaking, gospels. The variety of the texts makes a synthetic analysis quite difficult. But there are texts, such as the Testimony of Truth, that are clearly rivals to the canonical Biblical literature. In the Testimony of Truth, for example, the Garden of Eden story is told through the eyes of the serpent—a symbol, in Gnostic literature, of divine wisdom. In this version, the Lord threatens Adam and Eve, while the serpent prods them toward eating the fruit of knowledge. Perhaps the most important feature of the text is that it denies the actuality of the Passion of Christ and attacks the canonical enthusiasm for martyrdom. (In fact, several of the Nag Hammadi texts—the Apocalypse of Peter, the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, the Treatise on the Resurrection—tell the Passion story in far different ways, which suggest that Jesus was not an ordinary human being and that his suffering is not a model for emulation.) The Testimony of Truth mocks "empty" martyrs for their delusions of redemption and mocks thinkers such as Ignatius and Tertullian for welcoming martyrs as an offering to God; such a God, the text says, would be a cannibal.

And yet the orthodox vision of martyr-

dom, and of Christ as human, prevailed. Why? Pagels writes that the orthodox emphasis on martyrdom was essential to the building of the Church institution in the second century. Church leaders like Ignatius wrote letters about martyrdom to various Church groups at a time of terrible persecution of Christians, for distributing accounts of martyrdom was a way of warning others, closing ranks, and lifting spirits. The Gnostic vision of Jesus as a purely spiritual being, in this case, could serve no such purpose. The Church Fathers were rightly convinced that ordinary human suffering is better validated through the orthodox Christian version of the Jesus story: an ordinary man martyred by his enemies.

Another text that fascinated Pagels was "Thunder: Perfect Mind," a mystical poem spoken in the voice of a female divine:

For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin. . . .
I am the barren one, and many are her sons. . . .
I am the silence that is incomprehensible. . . .
I am the utterance of my name.

Pagels suggests that this passage represents a tendency in the Gnostic literature to provide for a female aspect in the representations of God. In the Gospel of Philip, the birth of Jesus derives from the the unity of the Father of All, a masculine divinity, and the Holy Spirit, a distinctly feminine presence. The text mocks the orthodox notion of Mary's conception of Jesus independent of Joseph: "They do not know what they are saying."

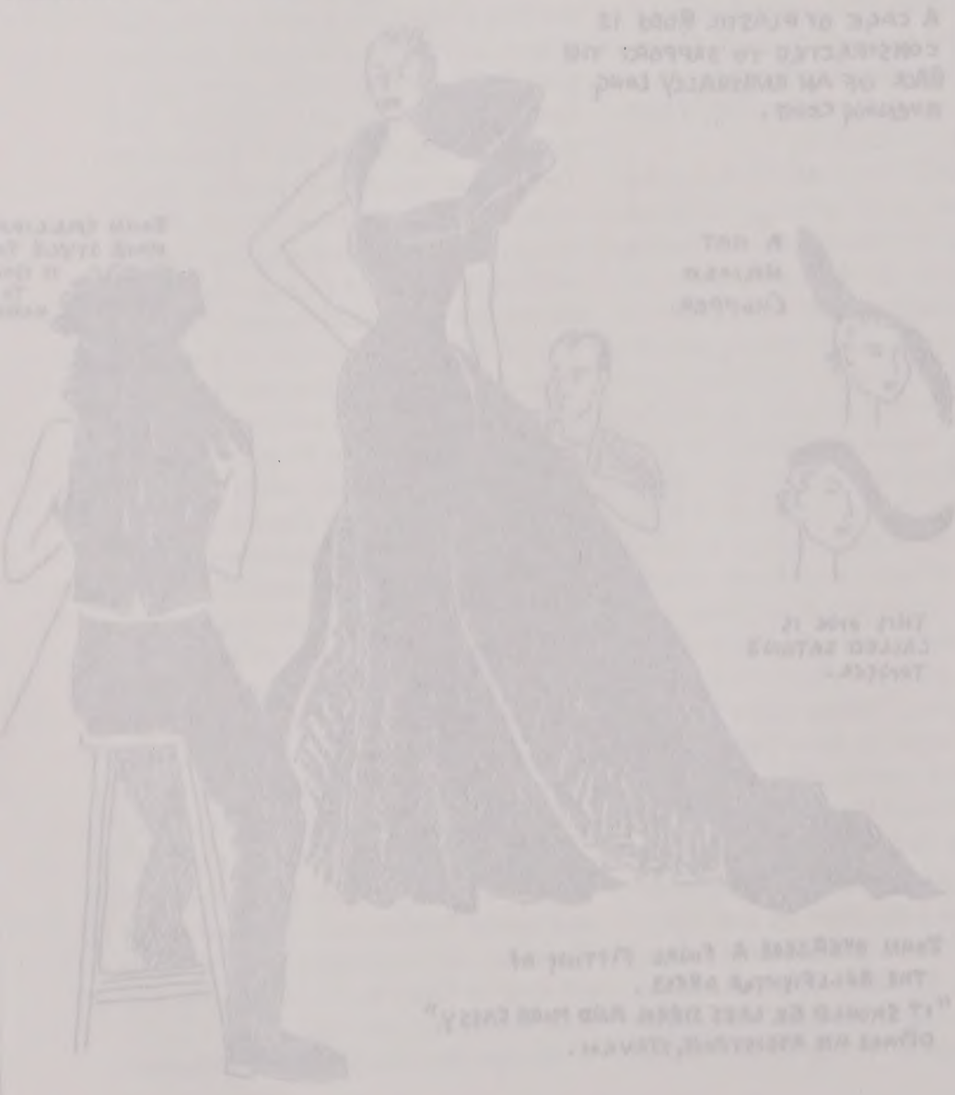
The early-Christian movement showed great openness toward women—Jesus himself flouted Jewish tradition by talking freely with women; women sometimes acted as prophets, apostles, and teachers—and the Gnostics generally affirm that tradition in their texts. But orthodox Christians struck back—and decisively. Once more, Pagels says that the reason for the orthodox victory was as much political as theological. The Church leaders simply would not tolerate what they saw as a feminine interest in Gnostic literature or a position in the Church hierarchy. Tertullian, a great enemy of Gnostics, was outraged at the idea of women flocking to heretical sects. "These heretical women—how audacious they are!" he wrote. "They have no modesty; they are bold enough to teach, to engage in argument, to enact exor-

SKETCHBOOK · BY MICHAEL ROBERTS

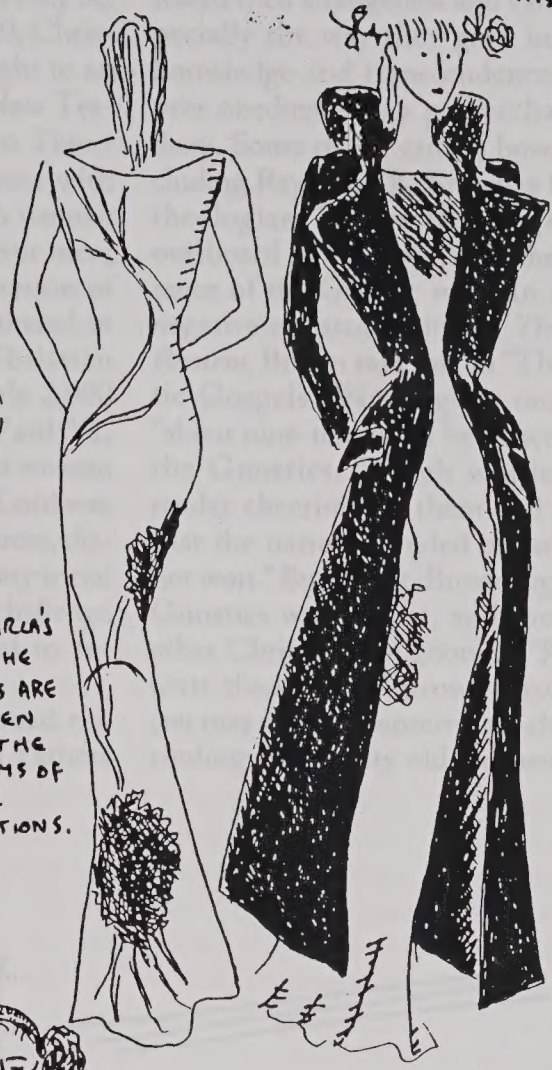
GALLIANO GETS READY

How the designer prepared his Paris fall show.

A CAGE OF PLASTIC RODS IS CONSTRUCTED TO SUPPORT THE BACK OF AN UNUSUALLY LONG EVENING COAT.
A HAT NAMED CHOPPER.
THIS ONE IS CALLED SATAN'S TONGUE.
JOHN OVERSEES A FINAL FITTING OF THE BULLFIGHTER DRESS. "IT SHOULD BE LESS SIREN AND MORE SASSY," OPINES HIS ASSISTANT, STEVEN.
THE PERFECTED CAGE, PAINTED AND LEFT OUTSIDE TO DRY, IS REMOVED BY SOMEONE WHO MAY HAVE THOUGHT IT WAS RUBBISH.
JOHN GALLIANO'S HAIR STYLE TOOK 18 HOURS TO ACHIEVE

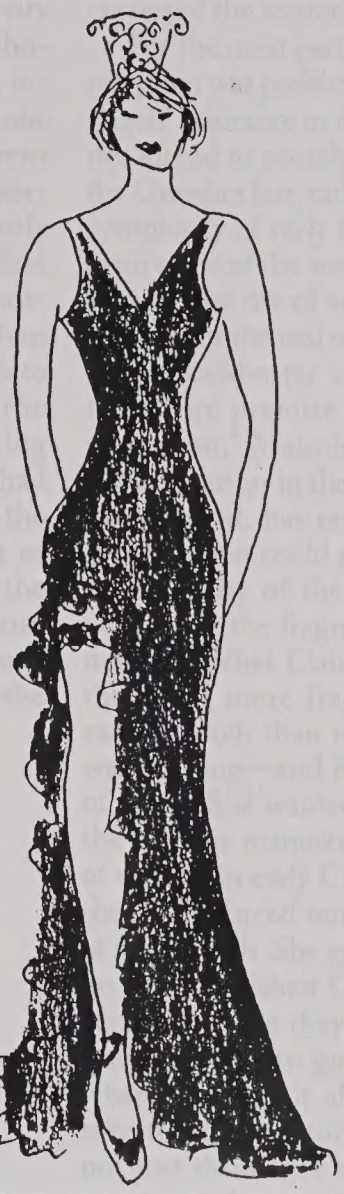


THE MODEL SHALOM TRIES ON HER OUTFIT, WHICH FEATURES MUCH FAKE ZEBRA.



ON CARLA'S DRESS THE SEAMS ARE HIDDEN IN THE STEMS OF THE CARNATIONS.

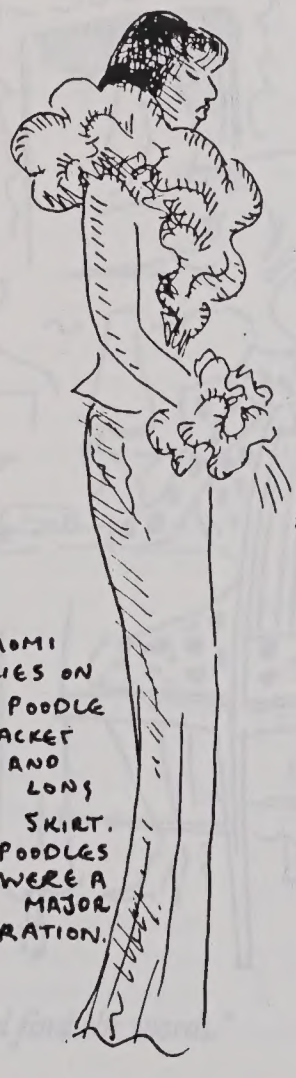
THIS ROSE HAT IS CALLED CARNIVORA.



HELENA IS WAITING FOR MORE FRILLS TO BE ADDED.

MODEL SHALOM HAS HER HAIR DONE.

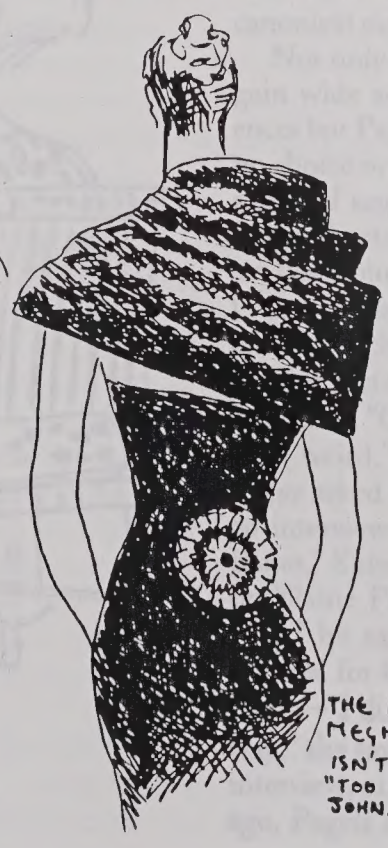
FAMOUSLY BLOND MODEL NADJA IS GIVEN FAKE BLACK HAIR AND KISS CURLS.



NAOMI TRIES ON A POODLE JACKET AND LONG SKIRT. POODLES WERE A MAJOR INSPIRATION.

THE TOREADOR DRESS GETS A HAT CALLED SECRET.

AN ASSISTANT FILLS IN THE ZEBRA STRIPES ON A JACKET WITH A FELT-TIP PEN.



THE ROSETTE ON MEGHAN'S DERRIERE ISN'T WORKING. "TOO FASHIONY," THINKS JOHN.

cisms, to undertake cures, and, it may be, even to baptize!" By the year 200, Christian feminism was clearly brought to an end by the text known in the New Testament as Paul's First Epistle to Timothy: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." This consensus of masculine hegemony "has continued to dominate the majority of Christian churches," Pagels wrote. "Nearly 2,000 years later, in 1977, Pope Paul VI, Bishop of Rome, declared that a woman cannot be a priest 'because our Lord was a man'! The Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crises concerning sexual roles, challenge us to reinterpret history—and to reevaluate the present situation."

Pagels determined as she read the Gnostic texts that the Church Fathers feared their strangeness and variety—especially the way they gave individual knowledge and transcendence priority over obedience to a patriarchal orthodoxy. Some of her critics, however, including Raymond E. Brown, a Catholic theologian, believe that Pagels went overboard in her claims for the importance of the Gnostic texts. In a mostly negative assessment in the *Times Book Review*, Brown said that in "The Gnostic Gospels" Pagels gives more than "about nine-tenths" of her discussion to the Gnostics, "which will leave the reader cheering for them and wishing that the narrow-minded orthodox had not won." But in fact, Brown argued, the Gnostics were élitist, and thought of other Christians as ignorant. "Read the texts themselves," Brown wrote, "and you may emerge 'conservative-chic,' concluding that crusty old Irenaeus"—the orthodox Bishop of Lyons—"was right after all, to regard the gnostics as the crazies of the second century."

"If I were a car, you could find the words."

For the most part, though, the critical reception was positive, and most accepted Pagels' assurance in the book that she did not intend to proselytize for or celebrate the Gnostics but, rather, to underline the complexity of early Christianity and explain some of the social and political reasons for the rise of an orthodoxy.

"One of the real reasons Elaine's book was a blockbuster was that it shattered the entire premise of the ecumenical movement," Malcolm Diamond, a professor emeritus in the Princeton Religion Department, has said. "There was this idea that you could get back to the presumed unity of the early Church, get away from the fragmentation in Christendom. What Elaine showed was that there was more fragmentation in the early Church than there is today. That was startling—and it was just one point of many. She wanted to show, through the Gnostic manuscripts, the active role of women in early Christianity and how they were forced out of the governance of the Church. She gave such perspective on the established Gospels and the diverse traditions they competed with. It was her point to go back to that time when you have it all up for grabs and take the competitors seriously and are not just dismissive of it. Her achievement wasn't a matter of discovery so much as it was a novel attitude to noncanonical material."

Not only did "The Gnostic Gospels" gain wide academic and popular audiences but Pagels herself became, through no choice or desire of her own, a kind of spiritual sage for some of her readers. She still gets letters from religious seekers describing their encounters with the Gnostic Gospels; some of the letter writers approach Pagels not as a scholar of ancient texts but as the texts' evangelist or author. "Once in a while, it all gets a little weird," she said, laughing. When *Vogue* asked the actor Harvey Keitel for an interview before the release of "The Piano," Keitel asked that the interviewer be Elaine Pagels. "The Gnostic Gospels," he said, had changed his life. (Pagels, for her part, refused the assignment—"I don't know how to write that way," she says—but she did sit in on the interview, at Keitel's request.) Not long ago, Pagels met a woman who was the

head of a Gnostic church in Palo Alto. "I was quite enchanted by her and delighted by her," Pagels told me. "She said she met some people at Orly Airport who told her about an ancient order—the Order of Mary Magdalene."

"But this is serious stuff," Pagels said. "It's fermenting. People are beginning to think about incorporating into the canon elements of Christianity that were lost. There are many people, of course, who have abandoned Christianity altogether and have gone out in search of more experiential modes of access to the divine, like chanting, channelling spirits—you name it. Gnosticism isn't a matter of belief. It's not about that. That's why I think the analogy is with Zen Buddhism, or Buddhism in general. It has to do with dimensions of experience and meditation. It's about practice, spiritual discipline, and the religious imagination. If you look at one of the Gnostic texts, the Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth, it's a dialogue between a teacher and a student. The student has read all the books, and the teacher says, 'Now you have to go beyond what you've read in the books.' And he tries to take him to a higher level of contemplation, to an ecstatic state through mantras, chanting, and so forth. It's about leaving belief behind; *gnosis* means knowledge, or understanding. I'm not a missionary for Gnosticism, but what interests me about it is that it opens up dimensions other than the ones usually available in churches or on the basis of a statement of faith, which is often a series of propositions that many people do not believe."

"Adam, Eve, and the Serpent," which was published in 1988, grew out of "The Gnostic Gospels" and elaborated on the idea of an early pluralistic Christianity. According to Pagels, the Creation story and Adam's defiant decision to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, as it appears in the second and third chapters of Genesis, was widely understood by early Christian thinkers as a parable of human freedom. Such an understanding had a profound influence on behavior: sexuality was without stigma, marriage was considered no less holy than celibacy, divorce was considered a regrettable but tolerable event. In Christianity's early manifestation, as a dissident Jewish sect, Pagels writes, its adherents championed the notion of free will. "So long as Christianity remained a persecuted movement," she wrote, "the majority of Christian preachers proclaimed the plain and powerful message of freedom that appealed to so many people within the Roman world—perhaps especially to those who had never experienced freedom in their everyday lives."

With the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the year 313, and the rise of Christianity as a majority religion, the interpretation of the Creation story—the self-image of Western Christianity itself—changed radically. When the monk Jovinian argued that celibacy was no holier than marriage, he was denounced by the fourth-century theologians Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, and was excommunicated. Augustine, whose pagan father had encouraged his youthful sexual adventures, gave up a Christian marriage that would have guaranteed him wealth and social status, and adopted a life of asceticism. He wrote about sex in the language of the addict, and, like some recovering addicts, he took an absolutist position: there is no middle ground on the question of lust; self-mastery is impossible; all men and women are fallen. In his interpretation of the second and third chapters of Genesis as the fall of all humankind, Augustine rejected the idea of free will and recoiled from human sexuality as innately sinful. It was Augustine's interpretation, Pagels writes, that became the orthodoxy of the Western church, displacing theologians as prominent as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. Augustine's interpretation was linked not only to personal experience and thought but to the politics of his day: it proved useful to the emperor. Where once the revolutionary church had preached a message of human freedom in the face of the Roman oppressor, now, as Rome's official religion, it described human nature as inherently sinful, fallen, infirm, and in need of the absolute authority of the state's moral institution, the church.

One afternoon in Princeton, I asked Pagels why either Augustine's reading of Genesis or the New Testament versions of Satan still matter.

"It's true that many Christians today would say, 'Oh, the Devil, who believes that?'—as if it were a throwaway part of Christianity," Pagels said. "Liberal Christians would say the Devil is irrelevant. But that's not so. The dramatic tension of the whole Jesus story would not work without this figure, because, after all, the story is about the defeat of the Lord. Why did Jesus fail if his failure wasn't due to an enormously strong and evil force? The shape of these stories matters so much to the way we think. The details are essential. Just imagine, it was only about twenty years ago that people began to think that the use of 'he' as a general pronoun might be exclusive of women. At a certain point, one realizes that it does make a difference. It might be a trivial example of the way a culture is formed, even without malice, but it points to the shape of the social order. In the case of 'he,' it points to the efficiency of patriarchy. In my own work, I've never been concerned with changing the language but, rather, with identifying the language—in this case, the language about the Devil—and seeing its effects on the social order. When I was thinking about 'Adam, Eve, and the Serpent,' I took notice that there had been all these recent changes in attitudes toward divorce and homosexuality, and yet for a very long time these sexual attitudes of Western culture were just built into the universe. Why? Where does all this come from? Much of what seems to be written into nature itself is a matter of cultural patterning. You don't have to believe in these religions for them to have an effect. The work is exciting because you begin to uncover what Jungians would call the cultural unconscious.

"What I'm interested in is how these images and stories relate to the way we live. How do we interpret our own lives and understand ourselves through them? How does that imaginative process affect our dreams, how does it appear in our metaphors? How does our imagination of the invisible relate to the way we act and feel and think? With Adam and Eve, it is clear that the social attitudes we have as children are shaped by the story. Satan is a way of perceiving opponents. You may not believe the mythology of such a universe, but it's in you, a background perception."

PAGELS lectures at universities all the time, but few appearances have meant more to her than her recent talk

on the Satan book at the Harvard Divinity School. Parts of the book have appeared in academic journals, and she has shown the manuscript to some colleagues, but here was a chance to rehearse her arguments in front of a room filled with graduate students and, most important, her former mentors—Helmut Koester, Krister Stendahl, and several other scholars of the New Testament and of early-Christian history. That day, Pagels was getting over a cold passed along to her by her children, and by the time our cab reached Newark Airport she was thinking about turning around and going home. But a few hours later, at the Divinity School lectern, she seemed miraculously transformed: healthy and ready for cosmic battle.

Pagels gave her reading of the development of the New Testament Satan and its role in the development of Christian anti-Semitism. The New Testament Gospels, she said, identify Satan not with the Romans (despite the dominant Roman role in the trial and execution of Christ) but, rather, with their Jewish contemporaries—"the intimate enemy." In the Gospel of Matthew (23:13-15), for example, Jesus accuses the Pharisees, the Jewish majority, of being demon-possessed and sons "of hell"; similarly, in the narrative of the Passion, Mark (14:53-64) makes it plain that "the chief priests and elders and the scribes" assembled and "condemned him as deserving death." Mark concludes that the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, as well as "the crowd"—the Jewish majority—were responsible for the death of Jesus.

The figure of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, grows increasingly benign with each successive Gospel; the Jewish enemy is framed in ever more hostile rhetoric. While historical testimonies of the time, from Philo and Josephus, describe Pilate's cruelty in detail, recounting that he would routinely round up Jews suspected of anti-Roman activity, he becomes in the Gospels a nearly sympathetic character, the better to depict the Jews as the satanic agents of Jesus' execution. The social result of this interpretation in the Gospels is that, as the Christian movement became more Gentile, its followers could find canonical justification for the hatred of Jews. At one point, Pagels looked up at the packed auditorium and said, simply, "This material is painful."

By the end of "The Origin of Satan," it becomes clear that, while Pagels does not consider herself an evangelist for Gnostic wisdom, she does in some cases show a clear preference for a Gnostic interpretation over a canonical orthodox one. After expressing her profound regret about how the figure of Satan has distorted human perspective and heightened aggression among peoples, she turns to the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, which, she says, offers a more subtle and promising discussion of good and evil. In the Gospel of Philip, Satan never appears. The message taught is not that there exists an eternal clash between good and evil but, rather, that each individual needs to know his potential for doing evil. "Instead of envisioning the power of evil as an alien force that threatens and invades human beings from outside, the author of Philip urges each person to recognize the evil within, and consciously eradicate it," she writes.

At the conclusion of the lecture, someone made the point that, while Satan is a critical figure in the four Gospels, he is almost absent from the other great New Testament literature, the Epistles of Paul, for example. Pagels had no argument with that, but she said to me later on that the Gospels, as literature, have an extraordinary narrative power that the Epistles, for all their theological importance, cannot match. "The Origin of Satan" is, in fact, a one-sided book. Pagels admits as much. Balance is not really her intention; in all her books, she is best at shaking up and rearranging set ways of thinking. She leaves the intellectual tidying up for others.

Once the graduate students and the guests had left the hall, Pagels went off to dinner at the faculty club with her mentors and colleagues. She heard a fair amount of criticism. Koester told me later that he saw "loose ends" in the book; Pagels, he said, finds evidence of Satan in texts "where it really isn't there." Stendahl wished that Pagels had covered Paul's Epistles, but he was more enthusiastic. "When the book comes out, there will, of course, be a certain amount of defensiveness," he told me. "People will say she is overdoing it. But I don't think so. Demonization is one of the plagues of religious tradition because you are dealing with an intense rhetoric intensified to the voltage of the divine. My only comments would be that she has not taken account of the countervailing rhetoric and traditions in Christianity: love your enemies, and so on." In fact, at the end of her book, Pagels does mention a tradition of generosity of heart in Christianity that runs from St. Francis of Assisi to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

After dinner, Pagels felt like talking some more. It was late, and I figured that, what with her cold, the trip, and the long day, she would be exhausted. On the contrary, she said that she felt cured, even charged up, by the lecture and the arguments over dinner.

"After my son died," she said, "I went to the Church of the Heavenly Rest, up on Fifth Avenue, just to see if I could stand to walk in there for the funeral service that would be held a couple of days later. I was with an Israeli friend. It was the Easter season, and I stood there listening to the Good Friday liturgy, all about the death of Jesus, and, probably because my friend is Jewish, I became intensely aware of what was being said. I was taken aback, really distressed, because within that story are these terrible accusations against the Jews about the execution of Jesus. It struck me so deeply, this demonic language. Animosity between groups is a human universal, but what's different here is the moral and religious dimension of the animosity. The Greeks had certain jealousies of the Jews, the Romans had their resentments, but Christianity added this moral and religious dimension."

Back in Princeton a few days later, I asked her if she thought that by publishing "The Origin of Satan" she would have an effect beyond the academy—whether the laying bare of the demonic language in the Gospels would make any change at all in demonization in the modern world.

"When I was talking at Harvard about trying to dislodge the inherited assumption of a structure of right and wrong in the universe, that was something I needed to do because of events in my life," Pagels said. "That doesn't mean I'm relativistic about good and evil. The book is a meditation on the issue of how we *perceive* good and evil. For me, the book moves from a consideration of the social patterning about good and evil to an aware-

ness of the individual's capacity for evil.

"When I read the Gospels now and I come across the figure of Satan, instead of gliding over it as part of the story, I see it as raising a sort of warning flag, and I think, Ah, what is this writer doing now? What is the clue? What group of people are we speaking about and who is saying this? I became really interested in the structure of who is being demonized and who is doing the demonizing. It's a question of awareness instead of just reading the story by rote. When that happens, it changes the way we read our own history. There was a time, for instance, when very few people who didn't suffer from it were aware of racism as an idea. Now this question is a part of our culture. It's not undone, but most people find it impossible to be unaware of racism. The same is true of sexism or homophobia. So that, too, is what the work on Satan and demonization is about. It's about being aware."

"Shall we join the ladies?"

NOW that Pagels has finished going over the proofs for "The Origin of Satan," she is starting to consider her next project. This time, she is thinking about the problem of religious participation—the contrast between how people can participate in religious traditions and rituals quite apart from accepting basic propositions of the Church. "What happens with Christians—people brought up nominally as Christians, as I was—they ask themselves, Well, do I really believe that?" Pagels said. "Do I believe that Jesus was the son of God, or whatever. And if they answer the question in the negative, they tend to abandon the tradition. That's quite different from Judaism. You can go to a seder and it doesn't matter if the person next to you is observant or is just home for the holidays. Everybody can participate in the seder, or go to a service. What you think about it or believe about it is not necessarily important. Rather, it's a kind of connection with a community. In a Christian community, that doesn't exist as much. Many people, if they don't believe, leave the religious traditions behind."

Sometimes, in our conversations, I got the feeling that the invisible world is still very much a presence for Pagels. She talks about Heinz often. He is there in her talk and, it seems, in her being. The loss must still be unbearable. At the same time, she told me that for the past few years she had been seeing "a wonderful man," a prominent law professor at Columbia named Kent Greenawalt. Like Pagels, Greenawalt was widowed six years ago; he has three sons ranging in age from twenty-four to seventeen.

"When you're seeing Elaine now, you're seeing someone who has gone through horrible stuff," her friend Elizabeth Diggs said. "If something terrible happens to you, you can either become heroic in the face of the awfulness of it and end up a better and stronger person or become diminished by it, become a victim and give in to self-pity and rage. After a time, Elaine came out on the other side. She's come out larger and more generous, kinder and more mature."

At the end of my last meeting with Pagels in Princeton, I mentioned what Elizabeth Diggs had said—that she had changed in the years since the deaths of Mark and Heinz. Pagels smiled. "At first, what I really felt had changed was that I unwillingly had to take on many of the tasks that Heinz had taken on in our life together—as a parent, as a provider, as a taxpayer, as an organizer, as the person who takes care of the car," she said. "There are certain ecological structures in any marriage—some with a traditional gender bias and some not. Simply, people take on certain roles. In a way, I had to do everything. But, most of all, I also wanted to take on the challenge of not giving up, of not despairing. Because Heinz was on the side of life. He loved life. He was full of explorative excitement, interest, passion. I realized that it would be no honor to him to say, 'I can't take this, I can't go on, it's too hard.' Somehow, I wanted to take on something of what I'd learned from him, the way he embraced life, with all its dangers and difficulties. I was challenged to do that. I can't say I've done it, but that's what I wanted to do."

"The Origin of Satan" will be published in June. It is dedicated to the living: "To Sarah and David with love." That same month, Pagels will marry Kent Greenawalt in an Episcopal church in Princeton. "It's like the beginning of a different life," she said. ♦